



# **PRESS RELEASE**

## **House Armed Services Committee**

### **Floyd D. Spence, Chairman**

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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#### **FLOOR STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN FLOYD SPENCE**

#### **CONFERENCE REPORT ON H.R. 4205**

#### **FY 01 NATIONAL DEFENSE AUTHORIZATION ACT**

Mr. Speaker, the fiscal year 2001 defense authorization bill has been a bipartisan effort from start to finish. In May, the bill was first reported out of the Armed Services Committee on a vote of 56 to 1. Later in May, the bill passed the House on a vote of 353 to 63. Now, I am pleased to report that all Armed Services Committee conferees in both the House and the Senate have chosen to sign this conference report in the latest reflection of the broad bipartisan support for this legislation.

This is not to mean that it has been an easy process. We faced having to reach agreement on over 800 legislative provisions, dealing with a broad range of topics, many having little or nothing to do with defense. However, with the strong cooperation of all members on both sides of the aisle and a determination to once again complete our work prior to adjournment, we are able today to present to the House a strong agreement that furthers the national security of our nation.

Mr. Speaker, this legislation represents the 6<sup>th</sup> year in a row that Congress has increased the level of defense spending requested by the President. Consistent with the budget resolution, this bill would authorize \$4.5 billion above the budget request in order to address urgent shortfalls in key military readiness, modernization and personnel accounts. The four Military Service Chiefs, in testimony before the Armed Services Committees, have repeatedly itemized these shortfalls in great detail. While this bill will not eliminate these shortfalls, it will go a significant way toward addressing the most urgent of these requirements.

I have said many a time that we are facing a military crisis in this country. Notwithstanding our efforts in Congress, the readiness and combat effectiveness of our armed forces continues to decline. Irrespective of who wins the election in November, America faces a fundamental national security choice next year – either we accept our role as the sole global superpower and step up and provide our military with the associated necessary resources, or we decline this difficult responsibility and start to walk away. I believe the choice should be clear. But continuing to attempt to fulfill our superpower responsibilities on the cheap is simply no longer an option. We are running our military into the ground, continuing to lose our most valuable national resource - our men and women in uniform and falling further behind the urgent need to recapitalize the force.

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With that admonition, Mr. Speaker, I want to briefly cover two aspects of this conference report that deserve particular attention.

First, this bill continues the work started by Congress last year in addressing the serious problems facing our military retiree programs. Last year, we successfully reformed the military retirement system and restored confidence in a program that had lost its appeal in attracting and retaining our best and brightest Americans into military service. This year, we continue this effort by tackling an even thornier problem: the military health care system and, in particular, access to adequate health care by the oldest portion of our military retirees - those who currently lose access to military care when they become eligible for Medicare.

This conference report allows Congress to finally fulfill the pledge given to millions of military retirees that they would receive lifetime medical coverage in exchange for their selfless military service to the nation. The conference agreement would establish a permanent program for all Medicare eligible military retirees and dependents to receive lifetime coverage under the TRICARE health care program. The bill would also provide a much-needed expansion of prescription drug coverage to ensure that all retirees have full access to this critical medical benefit.

Finally, the conference agreement recognizes the need to continue to aggressively improve the TRICARE program as it takes on an expanded beneficiary population. The agreement makes a number of important reforms in this area. However, we are committed to ensuring that TRICARE is able to properly and effectively deliver medical coverage to our military families, both active and retired. These changes will not only keep our past promise to America's veterans, but will go a long way toward ensuring that future young men and women contemplating military service know that their country will not forget them in their time of need.

Mr. Speaker, the second specific area I want to briefly cover involves the difficult question of how best to compensate Department of Energy and contractor employees suffering from the ill effects of exposure to radiation and other hazardous substances. This became one of the most difficult issues in conference as it raised a series of very complex and difficult policy questions that had not benefited from the deliberative committee process in either chamber.

However, I am pleased to note that the conference agreement includes landmark legislation establishing a new "Energy Employees Occupational Illness Compensation Program." This program establishes statutory eligibility for workers exposed to radiation, beryllium and silica in the course of carrying out their work in the U.S. nuclear weapons complex. The program authorizes compensation fund to be funded as an entitlement program and guarantees a specific minimum compensation benefit that goes into effect by next July 31 providing for a lump sum payment of \$150,000 and medical expenses for all covered employees.

I believe this is a just and fitting response by Congress to the tragic situation facing these courageous Americans who played an important but often unrecognized role in helping us win the Cold War.

Mr. Speaker, this conference report is a result of hundreds of compromises with the Senate. In this regard, the outcomes are not all where I wanted them to be. However, it remains a sound and balanced proposal that deserves the full support of my colleagues.

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We are able to bring this legislation forward only as result of the hard work and commitment to succeed by all conferees - in both bodies and from both parties. In particular, the critical roles played by the Armed Services Committee subcommittee and panel chairmen and ranking members deserves mention. We unfortunately lost our good friend and Readiness Subcommittee Chairman, Herb Bateman, before we could finish our work. But Herb's characteristic imprints are all over this bill and its many provisions to shore up sagging military readiness.

I also want to thank Ike Skelton for another very productive effort in guiding this bill through the process in an open and bipartisan fashion. On our committee, bipartisanship is not mere talk, it is the only way to approach the very difficult national security issues we must address.

I also want to thank Chairman Warner and his colleagues on the Senate Armed Services Committee for sharing our mutual commitment to complete conference in spite of overwhelming odds. It is this continued bipartisan and bicameral commitment that allows Congress to provide this critical legislation every year for the benefit of our men and women in uniform.

Finally, I want to single out the extraordinary efforts of my friend and colleague from Jacksonville, Florida, Tillie Fowler, who as a senior member of the committee and of the House leadership team has been an indispensable ally in helping us arrive at the best possible outcomes on so many difficult issues.

Mr. Speaker, this legislation is important to our troops, to our military families, to our military retirees, and to the continued protection of our national security. It deserves the strong support of this House and I urge all my colleagues to accordingly vote YES.

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